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JUDY

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Troubled Translators



Once again the Summer Institute of Linguistics is in trouble, and it's had more than its share of that. It is an organization

whose people wander into remote areas of the world recording obscure languages with the aim of translating the Bible into native dialects. Its enemies say it is a front for the CIA.

In Colombia that's what was said when 28-year-old Chester A. Bitterman, one of the institute's employees, was kidnapped in Bogota this year by leftist terrorists. There followed pleas from Bitterman's wife to spare his life and last-minute negotiations with a guerilla spokesman who offered to provide proof that Bitterman was still alive if the institute would pledge to leave Colombia.

As dawn broke on March 7, the body of Chester Bitterman was found inside an abandoned bus, draped in the flag of the revolutionaries, a single bullet hole in his chest. There was the usual round-up of usual suspects. "We still don't know if the murderers have been caught," says Bud Hancock, director of government liaison for SIL. "All we know is what we read in the papers."

All he knows is that every once in a while his institute becomes the target of someone's wrath - a very convenient target, with a very convenient epithet. CIA. Most rational people do not believe the institute to be an arm of the CIA. Hancock says, "Our folks are instructed as part of their orientation not to interact with anyone who might even be suspected of being CIA."

But that's irrelevant to the real problem. The real problem, and it is one originally provoked by the CIA which has in its history used people outside the agency, is that it is impossible for anyone to prove himself innocent. Being called CIA is like being called a Communist. There is no way to combat it or have it erased from your record.

"We had one person working for us in the Philippines who was kidnapped in 1975 - a British woman," says Hancock. "She was released after two weeks."

"We also had two people killed in Vietnam in 1972," Ruthann Geib, an administrative assistant reminds him.

Hancock nods, his face impassive. "When you consider we have roughly 5,000 people around the world, it's inevitable that you have a certain amount of risk."

The latest reports about the institute - and they are confused - come out of Ecuador. The late president, Jaime Roldos Augilera, before his recent death in a plane crash, had planned to end his country's contract with SIL in a year. Now, as the state department points out, no one really knows what's going to happen.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics with funding of more than \$35 million a year (mostly, it says, from private donations) does not have monetary contracts with governments, but it does have agreements with both national and local authorities about what it intends to accomplish in the isolated areas. One of the more significant criticisms of its work is that it alters the societies it observes. "Change is inevitable," replies Hancock. "The question is how to reduce the damage. We do everything we can to preserve the culture."

"A lot of our people are linguists learning languages that have heretofore not been written - and then they commit them to writing," says Geib. "They publish folk stories for local people in their native language, they publish agricultural primers, hygiene tracts." And, above all, the New Testament. The main goal of the SIL is to translate the Bible into the language of local groups. This is why when the institute proclaims, as it does, "The SIL is not a religious organization," it is doing itself a disservice by being slightly disingenuous. It is affiliated with the Wycliffe Bible Translators; its people are missionaries as well as linguists.

Last year SIL won the International Reading Association award from UNESCO for its work in Papua New Guinea. It also began a literacy project in the Sudan with a \$1.4 million grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development. Hancock says pointedly: "We have withdrawn our matching grant proposals from AID this year."

It is, however, quite possibly the AID money previously received that has encouraged the institute's detractors to suggest it is a front for the CIA. That and the fact that it has its own air and radio service. "But look, we work in really isolated areas," says Geib. "And radio is the only way we can contact medical or any kind of help. These are areas without roads, which cannot even be reached by boat so we need helicopters."

"I'll tell you something," says a man who has worked in Latin America for the United States government, "this stuff about the Summer Institute being CIA really makes me mad. Before I went down to South America I really disliked missionaries. But these people are incredible. They preserve unwritten languages that would be otherwise lost. They're doing important work."

Over at the institute, Bud Hancock isn't mad - just resigned. "Left-wing terrorists are by no means the only ones against us," he says. "A lot of people don't understand what we're doing. Definitely there have been groups that have targeted us. But we'd rather not be preoccupied by that."

He shrugs, smiling weakly. "Problems are only what you see when you take your eyes off your goal."